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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of**

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

PRIVATE SETTINGS

BY

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November 20, 1991

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PRIVATE SETTINGS

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INTRODUCTION

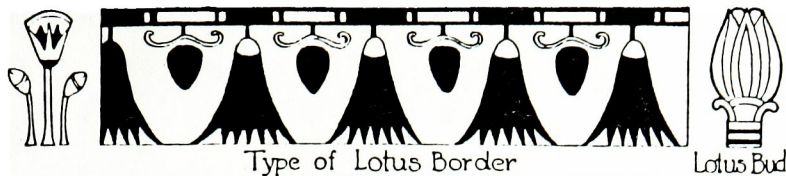
The creation of *private settings* for specific areas of a home was the goal of my thesis work. I set about this task by designing and constructing furnishings that shared similar features or details such that when situated together would present a cohesive ensemble. I chose three areas of a home for which to design settings: the foyer, dining room and living room. Realizing that time would not allow me to make up to twelve individual pieces, I decided to build two or three in each setting and to present the remaining pieces as drawings in order to complete the cluster or setting.

The first challenge was to develop three design ideas for the groupings. I began the process by choosing a detail or motif that excited me. I realized that it would have to be a strong yet simple design to be able to successfully carry through to three or four separate furnishings. My objective was to keep a continuous theme throughout the grouping. I wanted there to be the recognition that these objects were created for the same space and that each piece was enhanced by its proximity to the others. Having an established starting point for each succeeding piece proved to be beneficial in that it greatly reduced the time dedicated to designing. For me, one of the most difficult aspects of the design process has always been finding an initial point of inspiration from which to expand.

During the time that I was searching for a theme for my thesis project, I traveled to New York City to attend the "Designer Saturday" event. That year, the reception party happened to be held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The annual cocktail party was thrown in the Egyptian Room. It is a magnificent room with high, glass-vaulted ceilings and filled with ancient Egyptian artifacts including columns, statues and limestone-relief paintings. The original columns, rising at least twenty feet high, and the life-size statues were situated

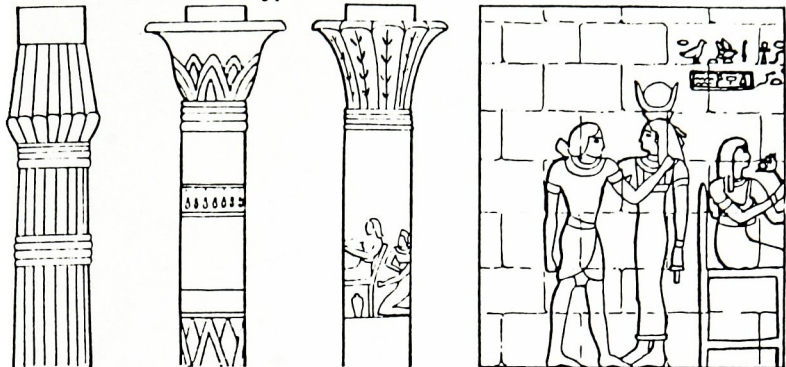
on the dance floor which had been cleared in the center of the room. As I was dancing, I felt a strong connection with this time period in history. At that moment, I decided to search for an Egyptian influence for the theme of my work. The following day, I returned to the museum to examine the artifacts more closely. As I wandered around, I noticed the repeated lotus motif and was also struck by the basic simplicity of form, for instance of the columns, even when elaborate ornamentation was added. I later learned that the Egyptians borrowed from the basic shapes of nature found in the Nile region. The acacia and sycamore fig tree leaves and branches as well as wildflowers served as their main inspiration for ornamental design.^{1,2} The Egyptians often attached religious symbolism to their motifs. The lotus bud and flower symbolized purity.^{3,4}

Similar to the gently curving lines of the lotus flower were the shapes of the top moldings on the ceilings and the capitals of some columns. It was a concave surface much like the interior curve of a quarter-circle sometimes called a bird's beak or cavetto.^{5,6} (See plate 1.)^{7,8} These motifs seemed ideal for use in the design of the first cluster of furnishings for my **private settings**. Ultimately, these simple elements of ancient art served to inspire the designs for all three furniture clusters. I should add, however, that the basic design detail for the dining room cluster was more specifically influenced by the shapes and contrasting colors of the headdresses and necklaces worn by the Egyptian people in that era. (See plate 2.)^{9,10} The gentle curve served as the fundamental form but here the added detail came from the alternating dark and light bands of color that were either painted on or created from different precious metals. The contrasting color combination was exciting and added to the overall appeal of the artwork. By using a mix of domestic, exotic and lacquered woods, I could also create this dramatic appearance in my furniture.



Type of Lotus Border

Lotus Bud



Examples of Egyptian Columns and Capitals

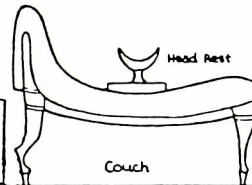
Incised Wall Decoration



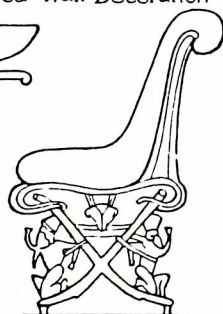
Quadruple Spiral



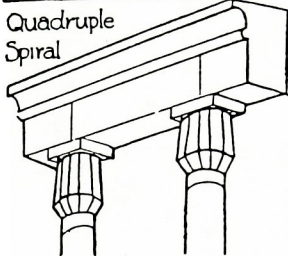
Vulture
Symbol of Protection



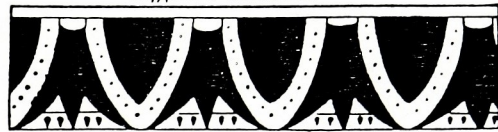
Couch



Egyptian Furniture

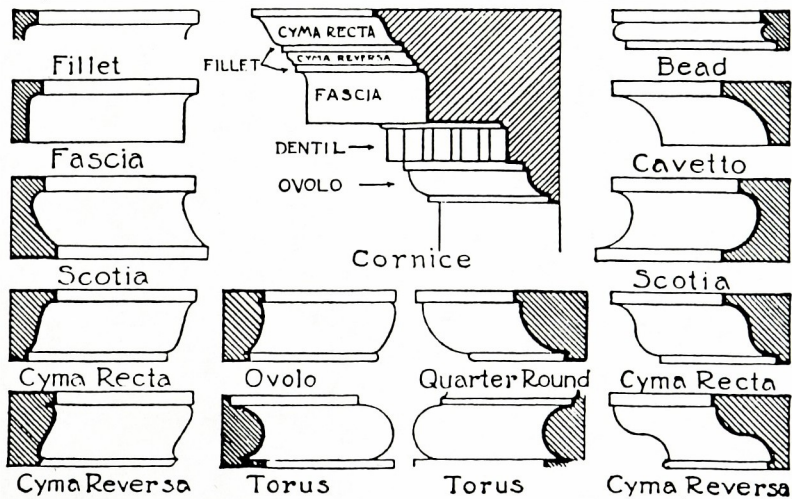


Column and Entablature



Type of Lotus Border

EXAMPLES OF EGYPTIAN ARCHITECTURE, FURNITURE, AND OTHER DETAILS.



GREEK MOLDINGS

ROMAN MOLDINGS

Typical classical moldings. The Greek moldings are curves produced by the free-hand stroke of the artist. The Roman moldings are produced mechanically by the use of the compass.



I have always been attracted to the neoclassical style that incorporates the classically-influenced columns, capitals, inlays and shadow details into contemporary furniture or architecture. My furniture was obviously new, but had lines borrowed from Egyptian art and architecture. My hope was that these furniture groupings would add a feeling of elegance, sophistication and coherency, even in otherwise eclectically-decorated rooms. For instance, I envisioned them fitting equally well in a contemporary home that perhaps blended modern and antique furniture and artwork or in a more traditionally decorated home. I hoped the use of the term *private settings* would also suggest an elegant, yet intimate, atmosphere. The following is a brief description of how I designed and built three *private settings* of furniture for my Master's thesis at Rochester Institute of Technology.

FOYER SETTING

The first group of furniture that I began designing was for the foyer. Being the entrance to a home, it is where first impressions of the owner's life style, or the "personality" of the home is expressed. I wanted to create, through furnishings, an immediate atmosphere of elegance incorporating the use of classical elements in a modern design and using a contemporary choice of woods and colors. (See plate 3.) The foyer table design started with a "V" shape for the main support members; the "V" coming from the lotus with its uplifting sides and domed top. I inverted the dome shape for a half-rounded pedestal, a typical neoclassic feature, added rounded side wings and an upper and lower shelf. String lighting with a hidden switch was attached beneath each wing to offer the option for subtle room illumination. I chose solid maple wood for the pedestal main frame members and wings, and purple heart wood for the upper and lower shelves. The shelves were joined to the frame support using hidden mortise and tenon joinery. The top shelf

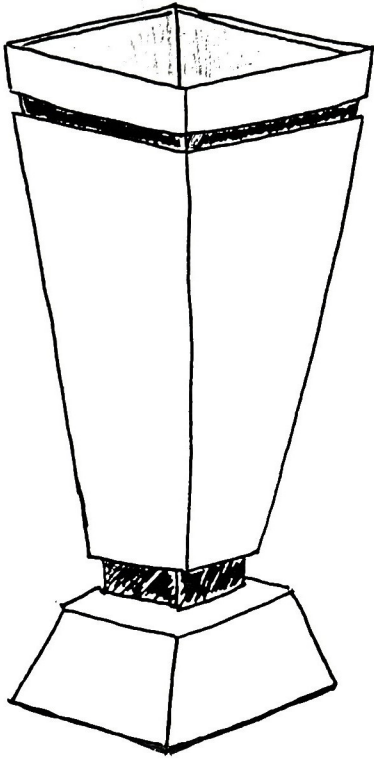


had three joints on each side and the bottom had two. For detail, I drilled corresponding one and one quarter inch diameter circles into the outer maple members which were then filled with purple heart inlay. These offered a visual point of interest when viewing the piece from either side, and related to the curvilinear elements as well as contributing to balancing the strong angular lines formed by the frame and shelves. Finally, a hand-rubbed, satin lacquer finish was applied. The table serves a practical as well as aesthetic purpose in that it can be an area to display artwork and plants or to place keys and gloves.

A mirror to hang about the foyer table was the second piece designed for this setting. (See plate 4.) I designed a double-frame mirror using maple and purple heart wood. Both frames had upward "V"-shaped side pieces with a domed top to resemble the lotus motif. Again, the purple heart was used as a detail wood to provide depth and contrast to the lighter maple inner mirror frame. The frames were constructed using miter and plate joinery. A rounded, top-cut mirror was rabbited into the inner maple frame which was then face glued to the purple heart exterior frame. The purple heart frame lines were designed to extend beyond the maple edges to create a shadow-line effect and the upper dome was flared to more closely resemble the actual lotus motif.

The last piece for the foyer setting is presented as a drawing. (See plate 5.) I designed an umbrella stand that incorporated the same "V"-shape main support structure and materials as the other foyer pieces. The design is simple and resembles the central negative space of the foyer table. I designed the base in maple and would use the stack lamination technique, with a purple heart recessed collar at the transition point between the base and vessel. An additional purple heart detail would be in the recessed groove





around the top section of the vessel. The inside surface would consist of veneered purple heart glued to the solid maple sides. Spline and miter joinery would be used for the side construction technique. As with the table and mirror, a hand-rubbed satin lacquered finish would complete the process.

DINING ROOM SETTING

I conceived the dining room setting to consist of a table with chairs, and a buffet with an accompanying mirror. All were constructed and presented in my thesis show except the buffet which is included here as a drawing. The table, being central in terms of placement in the space and function, was the first piece to be designed and built. (See plate 6.)

My design began with a basic rectangular format to which I introduced curved or crown-shaped ends. That shape, as mentioned earlier, was inspired by the formal headdresses and jewelry worn by the ancient Egyptian people. A stylized version of the contrasting bands of color seen in these personal adornments resulted in the seven dark inlaid pieces of wood evenly spaced along the curve of the ends. The inlays were visible from the top and sides as they wrapped around the edge of each curved end. The frame was made out of solid maple using mortise and tenon joinery. The top surface was a curly maple veneer panel edged with a wenge inlay. Rectangular pieces of wenge were inset into the curved ends to create the color-contrasting inlays. The end and side rails consisted of two bands of maple which receded and were separated by a recessed wenge band to give the illusion of a shadow line. The rails were designed to gently flair out to meet the curve of the top end pieces. Five-sided, solid-maple legs were attached using mortise and tenon joinery. As with the foyer furniture, several coats of satin lacquer finish were used for a polished surface.



The table was nonexpansive and allowed for six to be comfortably seated. The next task was to design six coordinating maple and wenge chairs. (See plate 7.) I began with a curved top rail accented with seven inlaid pieces of wenge. The shape and pattern again gave the impression of a crown or headdress. I shaped and laminated the maple and wenge side, front and back rails. I kept the leg shape identical to that used for the table except for scale. Mortise and tenon joinery was employed. Designing a comfortable chair was a major objective. I, therefore, chose to include a padded back constructed at an obtuse angle of approximately 105° . The padded seat reclined at a 7° pitch. I learned that extreme accuracy was necessary to produce twenty different parts for each of the six chairs. I fabricated many jigs and fixtures for the shaper and router to acquire the precision I desired. After choosing a fabric and upholstering the chairs, I successfully completed the dining room set. (See plate 8.)

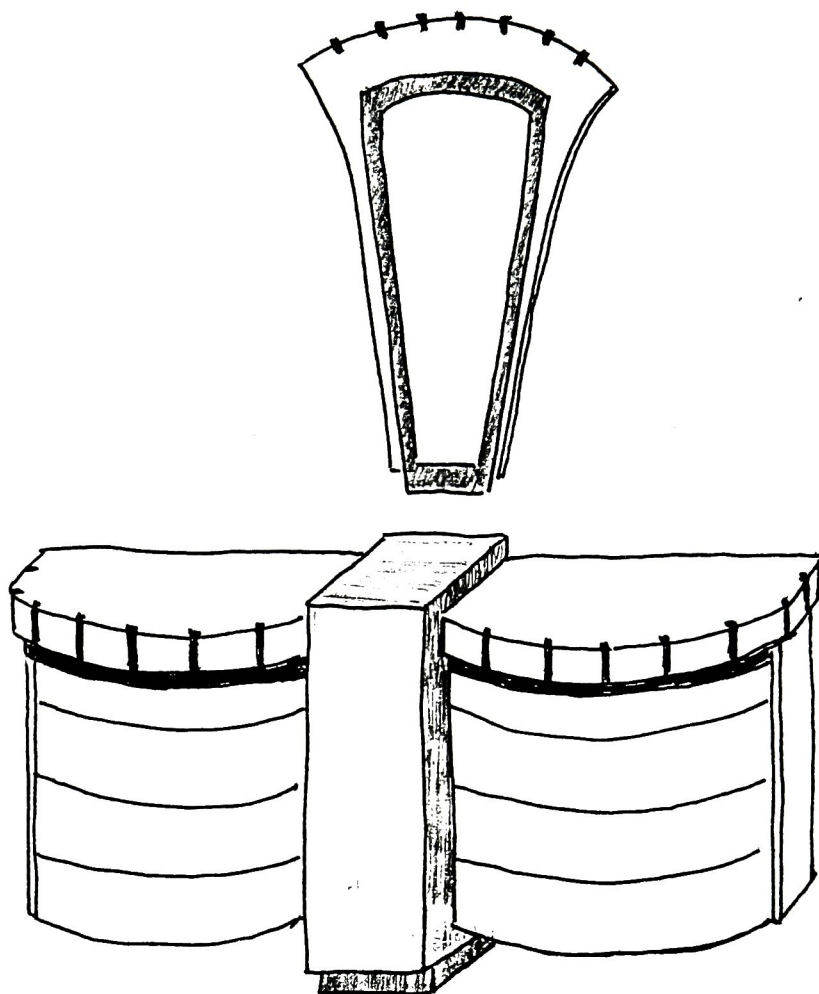
Needing accessory pieces for this setting, I decided to build a variation of the foyer mirror. I kept the identical shape, size and construction techniques. However, I reversed the positioning of the dark and light woods, and used maple and wenge rather than purple heart. The inner frame surrounding a bronze tinted mirror was constructed from wenge and the outer frame from maple. Along the top lotus-like curve, I glued seven "C"-shaped pieces of wenge. Unlike the flush inlays on the table top, these were raised above the plane surface to create a projecting detail. (See plate 9.)

My final design for the dining room setting is presented here as a drawing. (See plate 10.) While the table and chairs incorporated curved or organic shapes, the overall feeling was masculine due to the broad table top surface, the use of a dark rectangular edging and the strong legs. Therefore, I felt that a buffet designed with more feminine lines was necessary to create a









balance and to assure that my goal for an intimate atmosphere would be achieved.

The same materials and Egyptian design motifs would be carried through in the buffet table. Two symmetrically, side-hung, floating drawer cabinets would be attached to a central wenge cabinet. The entire unit would be attached to the supporting wall. The flush-mount cabinet door and the convex-curved drawers would have a push-release latch and hidden-reveal drawer pulls respectively to maintain pure lines. Flush wenge inlays would adorn the top surface of the maple side cabinets which would merge with the central cabinet two inches below that surface top. As depicted in the drawing, I planned to have the mirror hang above and to complement the buffet.

LIVING ROOM SETTING

Furnishings to be used in a living room composed the third ***private setting*** for my thesis project. There was a greater choice of options to select from when considering pieces to design and build for this setting. Coffee tables, end tables and entertainment centers were obvious first considerations; however, I finally chose three alternative furnishings: a liquor cabinet, a sofa table and a pair of pedestals. As I began the design process, I realized how well the lotus and cavetto motifs would lend themselves to these particular pieces. Again, as with the other two settings, I used contrasting color, in this case cherry wood and black lacquer, to create a neoclassical style.

In designing the liquor cabinet, I identified three basic requirements. First, it would be a corner cabinet; second, it would offer ample storage space with easy access to the contents; and third, it would have a display case with subtle lighting. The first criteria was the most challenging to fulfill. I designed the cabinet to be supported from the back, left and right points of a diamond shape. This allowed for the front point to be free from any structural bearing

weight which enabled the doors to swing widely open. (See plate 11.) One problem that arose out of this design was that the doors would close on 45° angled styles. This required that I find cherry wood that would not bend, twist or bow. The lower enclosed portion of the cabinet was built using frame and panel construction and rested on a solid base of black lacquered cherry. The base shape mimicked the simple yet elegant lines of the Egyptian cavetto molding. (See plate 12.) This detail was used again at the transition point between the lower cabinet and the upper, glass-enclosed, display case as well as for the cap. These bands helped to provide visual interest to this piece as the shiny black contrasted with the warm cherry wood. Inside the lower portion were two veneered shelves. The base formed the third and final shelf.

The display case glass doors were framed in cherry and opened to two glass shelves where stemware or small art objects could be placed. To add a dramatic element to the cabinet, I installed strip lighting above a sandblasted glass ceiling. This also served as a subtle illumination for the room. The pulls for both sets of doors were the last thing added. In fact, they were not designed until the cabinet was completed. I experimented with several options with varying lengths and shapes before returning to the concave curve shape. The successful conclusion was four simple yet refined diamond shaped pulls. As a first piece in my final room setting, the cabinet proved to be a strong starting point for designing the accompanying articles of furniture.

With very little time left before my thesis show, I set about to design and build additional pieces for the living room setting. This time element necessitated that I choose an article that could be built with relative ease and speed. It so happened that a fellow classmate had been working on a series of plant stands, pedestals and sculpture-like objects. I was attracted to the

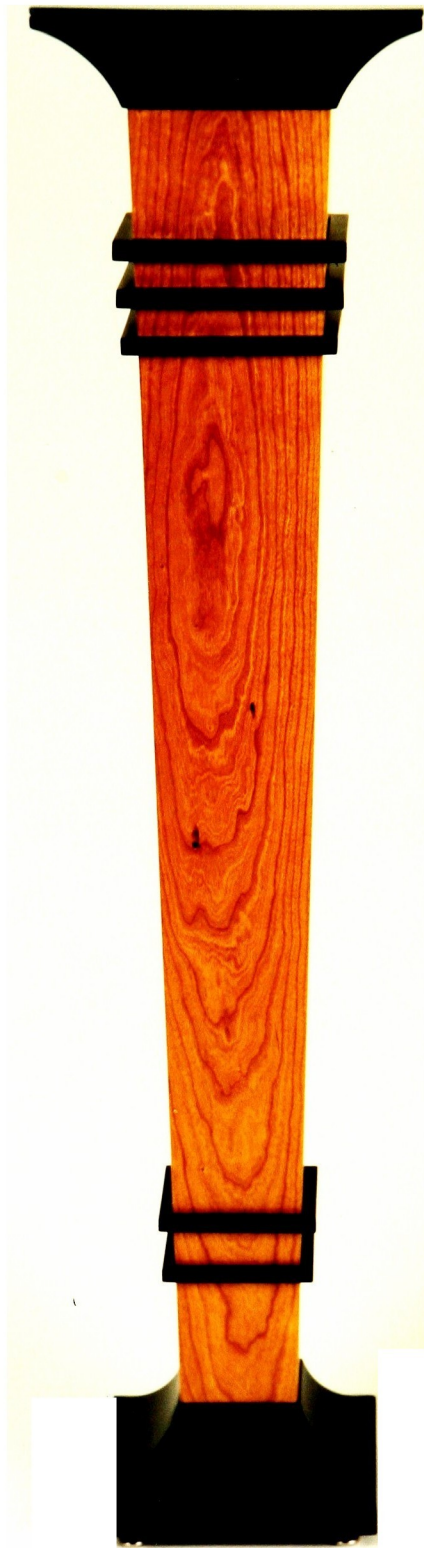


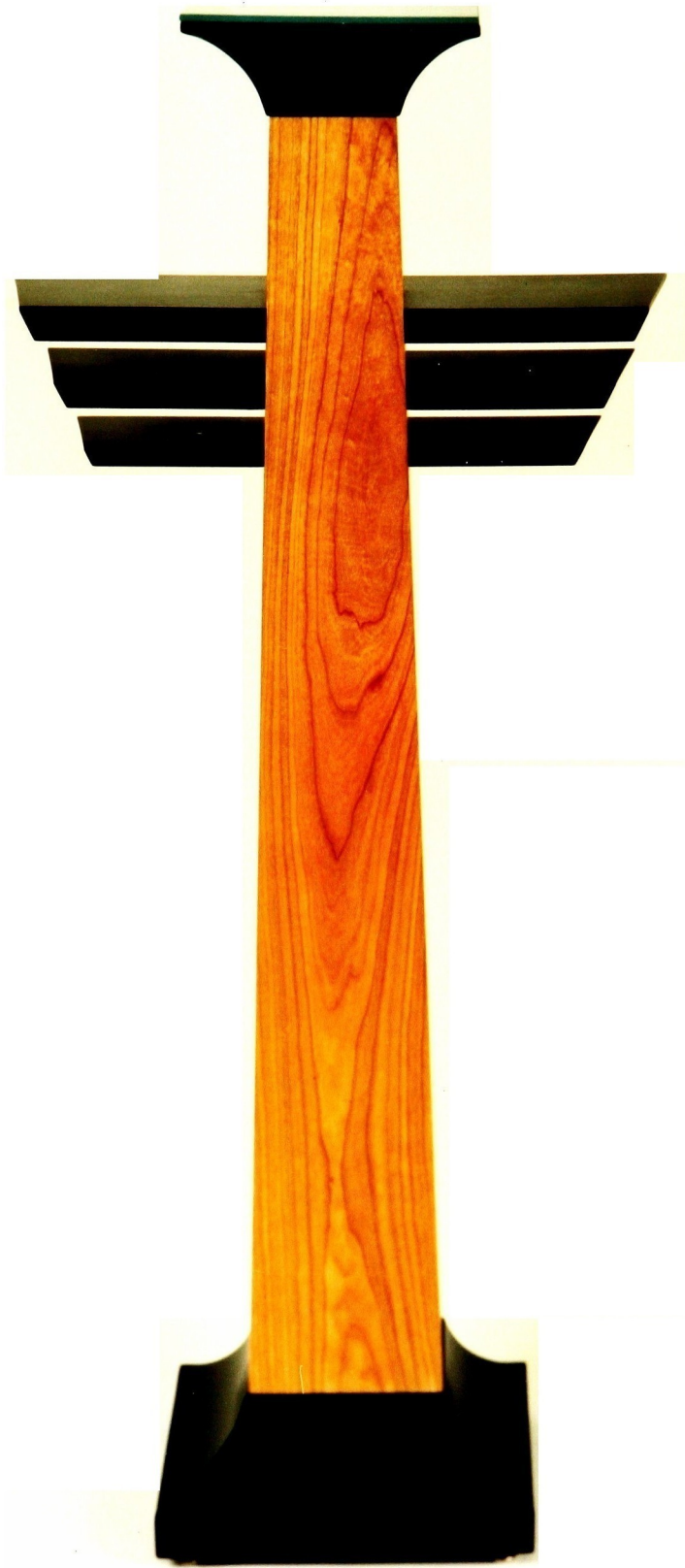


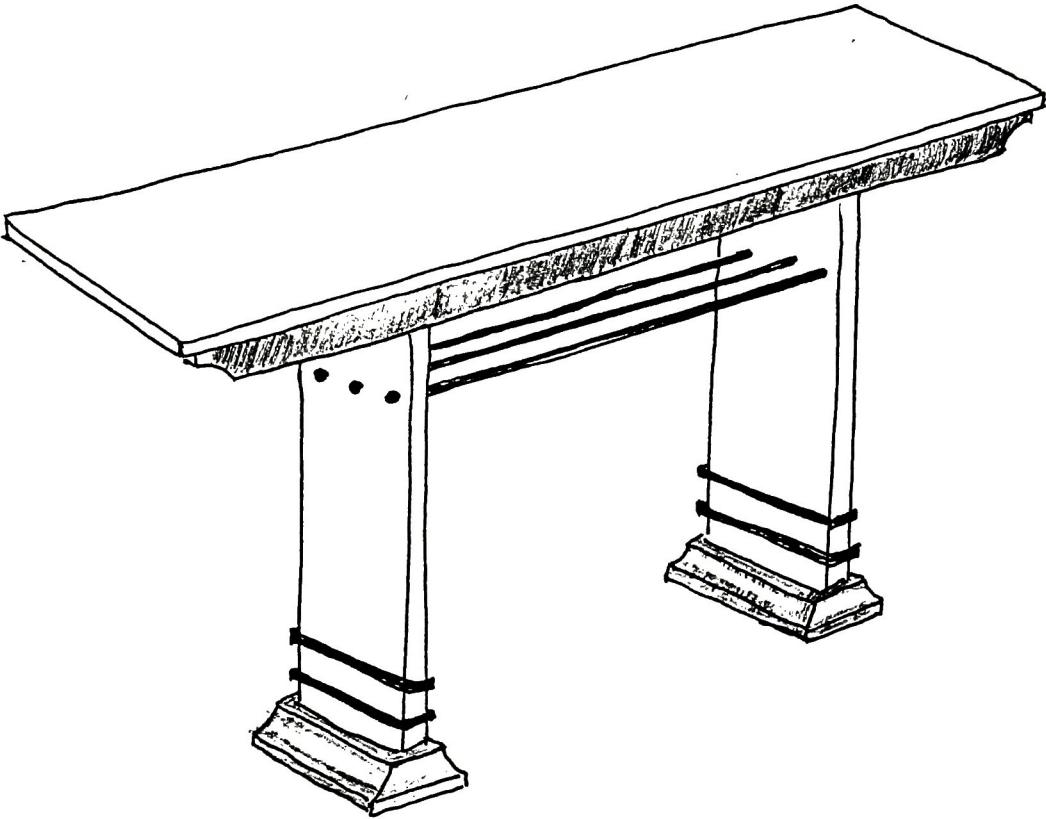
idea of working with a sculptural form which allowed for more freedom of design with fewer functional limitations and that presumably could be completed quickly. I chose to build two pedestals. (See plates 13 and 14.)

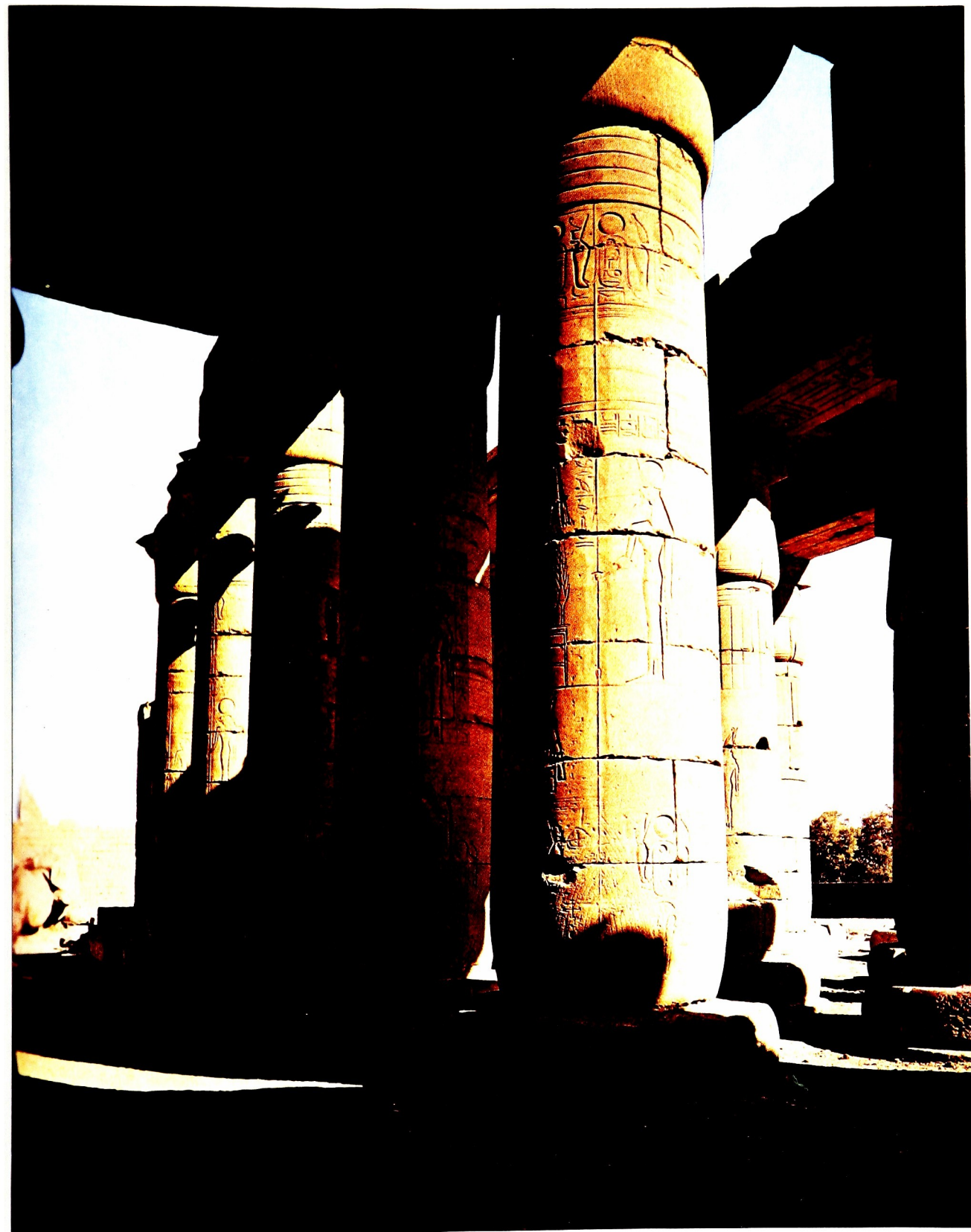
In keeping with the Egyptian theme, I modified the pyramid shape to make the four-sided, solid wood columns. The first pedestal (plate 13) had an ascending taper; the second (plate 14) had a descending taper. These were constructed out of cherry using spline and miter joinery. Again, I carried through the concave or cavetto design on the solid black lacquered base and cap which were attached to the column using plate joinery. This strong form needed a few accent parts. I began playing around with cardboard and dyed wood templates to come up with some alternative ideas. My goal was to add a surface detail or component that would increase the aesthetic quality by creating more depth and interest to the basic structure. I had fun with this project, experiencing the most freedom and spontaneity in the design process of my time as a graduate student at R.I.T. It was an important and gratifying experience as my tendency had been to primarily focus on the practical or functional aspects of design. Ironically, this occurred with less than two months time remaining in the program.

Finally to complete the living room setting, I designed a sofa table. (See plate 15.) As mentioned earlier, not all of my designs moved beyond the drawing phase. The sofa table with its cavetto-shaped top rail and bases and modified column legs, in my opinion, has the strongest neoclassical lines. The proposed materials would be cherry with black lacquered accents for the top rail, the magazine rack stretchers, the feet and the decorative rings or collars near the base of the legs. The rings, similar to those on the second pedestal, were influenced by lines that often appeared carved into Egyptian walls and columns for ornamentation. (See plate 16.)¹¹









I would approach the construction with a plan to exclusively use mortise and tenon joinery. Since the cherry table top would be solid, I would use floating mortise and tenon to allow for expansion and contraction. The joinery for the legs would need to go into a cross member attached to the top frame. With this additional furnishing, an identifiable living room cluster would be complete.

CONCLUSION

In summary, I have described a body of work composed of three clusters of furnishings that each would create *private settings* in a home. As they all share similar design qualities adopted from ancient Egyptian art, having an overall neoclassical style, they could conceivably occupy rooms in the same house. Viewed as separate groupings, however, my goal was to bring to a room or area of a home a feeling of intimacy, as visually the furniture would create a contextual cohesiveness.

I was pleased and somewhat surprised at the many design ideas that could be generated from a few simple lines. The upward flowing curve of the lotus flower and the cavetto style capitals were the essential shapes needed to give my furnishings the warmth that I felt was needed to project an aura of intimacy -- thus creating a *private setting*. It was indeed a fortuitous visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art which brought me rather dramatically in contact with the artifacts that so greatly impacted the design process for my thesis.

I learned that designing furniture need not be wrought with struggle or dulled by over-attentiveness to the functional element of the particular piece. Coming from an industrial arts teaching program, rather than from an art background, I was initially limited by my outlook on furniture building. I tended to see home furnishings as primarily practical pieces to fill a space and in the

case of chairs, to be comfortable. While these are both, of course, necessary aspects, I expanded my view to appreciate the aesthetic qualities as well. I worked hard to hone my design skills to allow me to then produce woodwork that incorporated function, comfort and creativity.

ENDNOTES

¹ Sherrill Whiton, *Elements of Interior Design and Decoration* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1957), p. 24.

² Helen Gardner, *Art Through The Ages*, rev. Horst de la Croix, and Richard G. Tansey, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), p. 96.

³ Whiton, p. 30.

⁴ Veronica Ions, *Egyptian Mythology* (Middlesex: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1968), p. 30.

⁵ Gardner, p. 95.

⁶ Whiton, p. 27 and 44.

⁷ Whiton, p. 33.

⁸ Whiton, p. 44.

⁹ Irmgard Woldering, *The Art of Egypt: The Time of The Pharaohs* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1963), p. 154.

¹⁰ Woldering, p. 184.

¹¹ Wolfhart Westendorf, *Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1968), p. 181.

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